

Electronic raster charts advocates seek July sanction

AGAINST a backdrop of rapidly increasing use in day-to-day operations, and evidence of high efficiency and reliability, electronic raster charts have still to be sanctioned at an international level in the context of safety legislation.

The July gathering of IMO's Safety of Navigation sub-committee (NAV 44) provides a new opportunity for the advocates of raster charts, the direct digital reproduction of paper charts, to force the issue.

NAV44 will again consider the legal status of the proposed raster chart display system performance standard, and it is to be hoped that this time round there will be a stronger input from users.

At last year's NAV43 meeting paper equivalency was not attained because some national administrations felt there was insufficient experience to prove the safety of RCDS.

However, there is a feeling in the industry that national economic considerations have had a strong bearing on the po-

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sition taken by certain states. A balanced operational appraisal of generic raster may have been lacking in some quarters.

Countries where hydrographic bodies produce raster charts and where manufacturers are active in supplying hardware and software for raster as well as vector systems are understandably keen to see the new medium achieve equal status to paper charts under Solas carriage requirements.

The converse also applies. At NAV43 last July three nations stood out against adoption of the RCDS performance standard and thereby vetoed official status being granted to raster charts.

Regardless of the economic politics, there is much to suggest that mariners and operators are obtaining real benefit from existing raster electronic charts and that the industry's commitment of resources to such

systems has not impinged on the development of official vector charts.

Hydrographic authorities, equipment and software producers in countries whose delegates declared in favour of raster equivalency at NAV43 contend that their arguments are not shaped by vested interests in the raster mode, since they remain fully committed to vector charts as the long-term goal.

Rather, there is a feeling that generic raster, despite technical limitations in terms of data and image manipulation, offers a pragmatic and reliable solution in the potentially long lead-up to the implementation of ecdis (electronic chart display and information systems) based on official vector charts.

While the building blocks for creating a worldwide portfolio of authorised vector charts are steadily being put into

place, the process overall will take time.

Seafarers and shipowners, in the meantime, have to cope with the challenges of the present in an ever more demanding trading and operating environment. There is everything to suggest that the rapid uptake of raster charts reflects perceived advantages of such systems in terms of assisting the mariner and contributing to efficiency and safety.

All the available evidence is that it is easy to understand, easy to use and presents a navigation picture that is the equal of the paper chart.

A large number of delegates was reportedly in favour of granting official status to raster charts at NAV43. But, with the lack of consensus and the reservations expressed by some countries as to overall depth of experience to prove the safety of RCDS, administrations were encouraged to obtain additional feedback from users at sea and report back their findings to IMO at NAV44.

Australia, Britain and the US, among others, have set about this task. In some cases ships are being authorised to use RCDS as the primary aid to navigation.

It is almost two years since Broere Shipping's 4,440 dwt chemtanker *Dutch Spirit* became the first vessel worldwide to use an electronic raster chart for primary navigational purposes.

The Dutch authorities recently told IMO that the Broere vessel and two others similarly fitted and subsequently enrolled into the trials programme had been granted permission to operate in this manner permanently. The systems are said to have reduced workload and stress for the crew while enhancing vessel safety.

Each of the Dutch ships uses electronic charts supplied under the British Hydrographic Office's Admiralty Raster Chart Service.

A recent initiative by Britain is to offer IMO's Safety of Navigation sub-committee representatives an opportunity to visit raster chart-fitted vessels and speak with the navigators at some stage in the run-up to NAV44.



The issue of paper equivalency for raster charts comes to the boil again in July at NAV44. Some question whether there has been sufficient input to the debate from actual users at sea